

## **AMENDMENTS TO THE CLAIMS**

The status of the claims as a result of this Amendment is set forth below:

Claims 1-5 (Canceled)

Claim 6. (New) A vehicle exhaust muffler having variable damping characteristics, the muffler comprising:

a muffler housing;

an exhaust gas pipe terminating at one end thereof in an interior of the muffler housing; and

a valve element having a closing member in the muffler housing adjacent the one end of the exhaust gas pipe, a guide rod having a first end coupled to the closing member, and a biasing element coupled to a second end of the guide rod, the biasing element located outside of and isolated from the muffler housing interior, the biasing element operative in a rest state to urge the closing element via the guide rod toward the one end of the exhaust gas pipe.

Claim 7. (New) The vehicle exhaust muffler of Claim 6 wherein the biasing element comprises a spring housing coupled to an exterior surface of the muffler housing and a biasing spring resident in the spring housing and coupled to the second end of the guide rod.

Claim 8. (New) The vehicle exhaust muffler of Claim 7 further comprising a spring guide coupled to the second end of the guide rod and shaped for receipt of one end of the biasing spring.

Claim 9. (New) The vehicle exhaust muffler of Claim 6 further comprising a guide sleeve at least partially surrounding the guide rod and having a first end coupled to the biasing element.

Claim 10. (New) The vehicle exhaust muffler of Claim 8 further comprising a damping element coupled between the second end of the guide rod and the spring guide.

Claim 11. (New) The vehicle exhaust muffler of Claim 10 wherein the damping element comprises a ring of knotted wire.

Claim 12. (New) The vehicle exhaust muffler of Claim 6 wherein the one end of the gas pipe is flared radially outwardly in conical fashion and wherein at least a portion of the closing element is likewise conical.

Claim 13. (New) The vehicle exhaust muffler of Claim 7 wherein the biasing spring is conical.